

Radio and the Redefinition of Kastom in Vanuatu

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In 1991, when working on the island of Ambae in northern Vanuatu, I visited a village called Lowainasasa, a steep climb from the end of the road that skirted part of the island. In the evening a woman called Jennifer Mwera came to talk. The conversation turned to *kastom*, the term used in Bislama, Vanuatu's lingua franca, to denote practices understood to derive from the precolonial past. Yes, Jennifer said, she had heard that *kastom* is the life of the people, she had heard it from the government on the radio. At the time, I was working as a volunteer for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, setting up a program called the Women's Culture Project, and simultaneously undertaking my doctoral research. In both these roles I was trying to understand what the term *kastom* meant, and how it related to people's daily practice. I was struck by Jennifer's comment, and her combination of *kas-tom*, government, and radio. Since then I have, in my continuing engagement with *kastom* in Vanuatu, found her remark increasingly significant.

This paper is an attempt to unpack some of the interconnections between *kastom*, government, and radio. It is my contention that radio has been extremely important in the formulation of the concept *kastom*, and in developing the idea of Vanuatu as a nation. In an area where communications are difficult and where literacy has only begun to be widespread in the last two decades, radio is the preeminent form of communication and engagement over distances. The impact of radio has been substantially enhanced by the model of broadcasting employed until recently in Vanuatu.

THE INTRODUCTION OF RADIO COMMUNICATIONS

The difficulty of communications in Vanuatu is partly a matter of geography. Most of the islands in the archipelago are small, many are surrounded by open sea, and the terrain of nearly all is rugged, making communication a challenge even within one island (map 1). This difficulty is also a matter of language and culture. The nation's population of about 180,000 people speak a total of 113 languages (Tryon 1996, 171); the Anglo-French Condominium Government of the New Hebrides (1906–1980) complicated the situation further with two languages of administration. Today the islands are linked by the irregular itineraries of small trading vessels known as copra boats, and by a small plane service operated by a government-owned company, and the nation is united in speaking the neo-Melanesian pidgin Bislama. Mail travels to the islands with relative ease, but its delivery within an island is often a matter of happenstance. The two towns—the capital, Port Vila, on the central island of Efate, and Luganville on the northern island of Espiritu Santo—have electric power supplies. Except for irregular power services at some provincial centers, the rest of the country has no access to electricity except where individuals own small generators.¹ Any electrical equipment, such as radios, is dependent on batteries.

Radio was introduced to the New Hebrides during the First World War, when a small radio station that was set up in Port Vila used Morse spark transmitters to communicate with ships and with New Caledonia. A teleradio network was introduced in the Second World War for the purposes of coastwatching. The network, which was controlled by the British government, was set up using the shortwave frequency 6900, just off the amateur radio frequency band, so that amateurs could use their own aerials and equipment to access it. Everyone on the network had to check in to the transmitting and receiving station in Port Vila, known as Radio Vila, morning and afternoon, and were allowed only to pass messages, not to talk among themselves.

The coastwatching network became the basis of radio communications in Vanuatu after the war. Although overseas and shipping communications continued to use Morse code, through the next few decades the teleradio network became the lifeline for expatriates living in the archipelago. Certain periods each day were scheduled for specific groups to use the frequency, but outside schedule times, people throughout the region used 6900 to talk to each other. Frank Palmer, who was involved with

teleradio for many years from the Second World War, considered that this teleradio network constituted broadcasting in its purest sense (taped interview, 29 Jan 1997). It was, he said, the news broadcast for the country, because those people who didn't have a teleradio license had a short-wave receiver, and could and did listen to 6900, not only to check for messages to themselves, and messages being broadcast by Radio Vila each morning and afternoon, but also to hear what everyone else was talking about. Palmer recalled that a planter on Epi called Frank Harvey had speakers for his teleradio set up throughout his house, so that he could listen from morning to night.

This was, of course, an expatriate affair, and so were the various early attempts at broadcasting. Before the Second World War, Harvey worked for Radio Vila as an operator. He also had an amateur radio license. At that stage amateurs were allowed to go on the broadcast band, and Harvey broadcast to the immediate vicinity of Port Vila three nights a week for about an hour, collecting and broadcasting local news. When France sent a soccer team to the New Hebrides in about 1948, Frank Palmer broadcast the three soccer matches to the whole archipelago as a one-off event, using his amateur radio setup. Radio Noumea rebroadcast the matches for New Caledonian audiences.

Radio Vila was used, to a limited extent, by the Ni-Vanuatu.² Local people did occasionally send messages within the country and used the overseas Morse service, for example, to contact family members studying overseas. Messages in both cases were prepared as telegrams—people went to the Post Office and filled in a telegram form that was then delivered to Radio Vila for transmission. However, few Ni-Vanuatu owned radio receivers, partly because of the expense and difficulty of owning and operating a valve radio, and partly, it can be assumed, because radio was directed at an expatriate audience and involved communication in English and French. Ni-Vanuatu staff were employed at Radio Vila.

It would appear that Ni-Vanuatu started listening to the radio during the 1960s as the result of a number of developments, the first being the introduction of the transistor. Invented in 1947, the transistor not only used less power than the valve (which was until then the essential component of radios for voice transmission) but was smaller, cheaper, and more durable. The transistor, which made the cheap radio receiver possible, first came onto the market in the United States in 1953. It was possible to buy transistor radios in the New Hebrides from the mid to late fifties.

Secondly, during and after the Second World War, a number of short-wave radio services developed in the Pacific. Radio Australia, for example, started broadcasting in 1939. It seems that some educated Ni-Vanuatu purchased transistors and listened in the islands to Radio Australia, Radio Noumea, and, from its inception in the early sixties, Radio Solomons. Thus, a man in the northern Vanuatu island of Maewo, Chief Shadrach Rasa Usi of Kerebei village, recalled that a radio was first brought to his village by a Ni-Vanuatu schoolteacher in 1955, and that there being no broadcasting in the New Hebrides at the time, they listened to Radio Solomons and Radio New Guinea (interview, 3 Feb 1997). Interest in listening to such services depended in part on a grasp of English or French acquired through mission schooling or employment.

The first broadcasting initiative that most Ni-Vanuatu remember as originating in the country, one remembered with great affection, was a short weekly program recorded in the New Hebrides, but broadcast by Radio Noumea. The detail of the transmission through Radio Noumea was perhaps not appreciated, or attended to, by most Ni-Vanuatu listeners—Chief Shadrach, for example, remembered the program as the first broadcast from Radio Vila. The program was prepared by three Frenchmen: a businessman, Pierre Bourgeois; the then chairman of Vila Town Council, Georges Milne; and a Catholic priest, Father Zerger. It started in about 1960, and was produced for about five years. Each man recorded material that interested him, using reel-to-reel tapes that were then sent to Noumea: programs included local news, music, and stories. George Milne gathered together some of the young men who worked for the Vila Town Council, who formed a stringband that he recorded for the program.³ Father Zerger, who was partly based in the islands, recorded traditional stories and songs.

Although the program, broadcast for ten to fifteen minutes most Wednesday evenings, was in French, and was intended primarily for French citizens, it made a significant impact on Ni-Vanuatu. The content included material produced by Ni-Vanuatu themselves (the stringband, the traditional stories and songs), and attention was drawn to this content by the theme song that introduced it each week. The song, called *Kavelicolico*, was sung by a man from Ifira Island (a small island in Port Vila Harbour). This small song is very engaging and tuneful, so much so that the program was known, and is remembered, as *Radio Kavelicolico*. I have never talked to anyone about the program without them singing the song to me. Paul Gardissat, a Frenchman who subsequently worked

for Radio Vanuatu, was working as a teacher on the island of Ambae during this period. He recalled that on Ambae, people hearing the theme would put their ears close to the radio to listen, the quality of the broadcast being poor and requiring close attention. At that period, he said, everybody in the New Hebrides sang the song. Gardissat's understanding is that it was about many small crabs on the beach, which took each other's hands to form a circle, the implication being that people also should be together, hand in hand (taped interview, 14 Feb 1997). Given that the song was in the Ifira language, this meaning was obscure to all but the Ifira Islanders themselves.

Thus, the first broadcast to make an impact on local people in the New Hebrides was one that caught their attention with a traditional song from the region and followed that with other local products deriving from both traditional practice and from contemporary developments—the string-bands. While by no means all Ni-Vanuatu would have understood stories told in French, all would have had access at some level to the music.

Prior to the colonial era, there was a considerable amount of trade and exchange through the region, and in most areas people were familiar with the ideas and practices of groups who lived adjacent to them. Along with exchanges in material items, there was an extensive trade in nonmaterial objects, in rituals, myth cycles, dances, songs, and so on. Kirk Huffman, writing about this trade in northern Vanuatu, remarked that in this area rituals “were, and are, thought to have a power and spirit of their own that urges them to get up, move to other areas, to stay there for a while, and then move on” (1996, 190). In other words, while it would be quite misleading to suggest that people throughout the archipelago were familiar with the knowledge and practices of the whole region, it is true to say that the idea of diversity and similarity in local practice was well established, and, moreover, that people were interested in it.

Huffman has argued that interisland trading started to diminish in the 1860s with the arrival of blackbirding ships, which had no compunction in kidnapping the crews of trading canoes found in their path, and was subsequently actively discouraged by missionary, trader, and condominium government pressures. Missionaries discouraged trade in cultural items for reasons of evangelism, traders because indigenous trade in “European” items interfered with their own business, and the condominium in support of both objectives. As interisland trade diminished, a new means of intergroup communication developed through the labor trade itself. Men and a scattering of women recruited for work on, for

example, the Queensland sugarcane plantations, or on plantations within the New Hebrides, worked side by side and engaged at some levels in the exchange of knowledge and practice. This was the context in which Vanuatu's lingua franca, Bislama, developed. Bislama, a neo-Melanesian pidgin, became the language in which Ni-Vanuatu communicated with each other. People traveled inside and outside the archipelago, were exposed to the diversity and similarities of each other's ways of living, and built a common language.

Into this context of the knowledge of diversity, and the remembered exchange of material and nonmaterial objects, "Radio Kavelicolico" first broadcast what came to be known as *kastom* to the archipelago. There is no documentation for the introduction of the word *kastom* into Bislama, but I suggest that the term originally derives from missionary endeavors to make a distinction between unacceptably heathen practice, and acceptably Christian behavior.⁴ The antithesis of *kastom* in this opposition is the Bislama term *skul*, which until the late 1960s referred not so much to school in the English sense, as to the whole missionary project of education. Until the late 1960s the term *kastom* carried a negative connotation—it was used to refer to people who still lived in the bush, in the bad old ways, in the darkness of unenlightened heathenism (see Lindstrom 1982; Jolly 1982). Ni-Vanuatu experience, with rare exceptions, was that Europeans disapproved of and discouraged local knowledge and practice. To radio listeners, therefore, the broadcast of indigenous songs and stories represented an affirmation of local knowledge and practice at a period when such affirmation was not generally expected from Europeans.

There is a further aspect to these early broadcasts. For most Ni-Vanuatu local practice is, in the most fundamental sense, an outcome of the place itself. Joël Bonnemaison argued that on the southern island of Tanna, "in traditional thinking, cultural identity is merely the existential aspect of those places where men live today as their ancestors did from time immemorial" (1984, 118), while Margaret Jolly commented that for the Sa of south Pentecost, land "is thought to be a precondition of human culture" (1981, 269). In the terms of such understanding, radio broadcasts that originate in the archipelago should contain the knowledge and practice that is an outcome of the land itself. Perhaps also because of this identity between place and practice, people such as Chief Shadrach assumed that Radio Kavelicolico derived from the archipelago itself. Interestingly, Radio Solomons broadcast news from the New Hebrides every week during the early sixties, but no Ni-Vanuatu to whom I spoke

about the development of radio mentioned these broadcasts, although they did recall listening to the station.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF BROADCASTING

During the early sixties Radio Vila continued to concentrate on communications, operating all internal public communications, shipping and teleradio, aeronautical communications, and meteorological reporting on the same frequency channel. In addition, the service operated one Morse circuit that was used to transmit to Suva, Sydney, Noumea, Honiara, and Santo in turn (Page 1993, 162). A new communications transmitting station was opened at Malapoa Point in Port Vila in 1965. Broadcasting was initiated in 1966, according to Rex Robinson, then radio engineer, to give the joint administration a direct outlet for government information and so relieve the telecommunication service (Page 1993, 164). Broadcasting was the joint responsibility of both governments, although the British were responsible for providing equipment and establishing studio facilities. Each administration had its own Information Office, which produced a newspaper and prepared material for broadcast.

The Broadcasting Service was opened by the Right Honourable Fred Lee, MP, British secretary of state for the colonies, on 2 August 1966. The first British information officer, Michael Leach, recalled that the inaugural broadcast comprised a message from the queen read by Mr Lee; an address by General Billotte, the French minister of state for overseas departments and territories, recorded in Paris; and speeches by the French resident commissioner and the acting British resident commissioner, Sir Colin Allan (Page 1993, 172)—an extraordinarily formal lineup for such an otherwise unostentatious beginning.

Initially there was one daily half-hour program, broadcast from the communications transmitter at Malapoa during the lunch hour, when the transmitter was not needed for the teleradio schedule. The program was pretaped, prepared by the British and the French Information Services, respectively. Broadcasting constituted another arena in which the British and the French could compete. Charlot Long Wah, who worked as a teleradio operator from 1959 to 1963 and was involved in making early recordings for broadcasts, commented that programs involved the endless iteration of French and English viewpoints (interview, 12 Feb 1997). Each government's Information Office employed Ni-Vanuatu staff.⁵

Michael Leach recalled that early programs included news bulletins in

the three languages, a magazine program of interviews with interesting visitors, elaboration of the news, and "items of local culture" (Page 1993, 172).⁶ Although there was resistance from the condominium government to the use of Bislama, by 1971 Radio Vila (as the broadcasting station continued to be called) was using this language to present the news and in other programs. Music included "either tribal chants or local popular music and record requests" (Page 1993, 172). Radio Vila thus continued the practice initiated by Radio Kavelicolico, of broadcasting indigenous knowledge and practice, and thereby providing an implicit affirmation of it by the condominium government.

Government district agents, reporting on the response to Radio Vila in the islands, told Leach that "at transmission times, those with transistor radios, often the village schoolmaster, would hang them in a tree and people gathered around to hear the local news" (Page 1993, 173). In 1971, when the service broadcast for an hour at midday and an hour and a quarter at night, the British administration sent out 300 audience survey forms, of which 67 were returned, representing 54 villages. This sample produced a statistic of seven radios per village, each of which had an average of ten listeners (NHBNS 1971). These statistics are obviously biased in favor of those who were already listening and were therefore interested in completing the survey. Paul Gardissat's experience, while teaching in Ambae and the Banks Islands between 1966 and 1975, was that reception in the remoter parts of the country was not good at all, and that people in these areas were not interested in making the effort to listen to Radio Vila.⁷ In 1971 Australia donated a new 2-kilowatt transmitter that was dedicated to broadcasting, and this improved reception in remoter islands to some extent.

Although Radio Vila included "items of local culture" from its inception, the first programs devoted to this subject seem to have been developed in the early seventies. Godwin Ligo, a Ni-Vanuatu from north Pentecost who joined the British Information Office in 1969 (taped interview, 12 Feb 1997),⁸ started to make a program called *Taem Nao, Taem Bifo* (The Present, the Past) somewhere around 1970 or 1971. In his work for the British Information Office, Ligo toured Efate and other islands showing films, and wherever he went he took a reel-to-reel tape recorder on which he recorded songs and stories for the program. Recordings were made in Bislama. Later, Ligo said, he found his way to various islands specifically in order to record stories and songs for the program. He would send messages on the radio to announce his arrival,

and to tell people to prepare stories and songs to record, and then he would go and record them. The program was broadcast on Tuesday evenings and repeated on Thursday evenings, probably not with great regularity. The word *kastom* was at this period still tainted with a negative connotation—*kastom* was still the negative opposite to the positive of Christianization and development.

Ligo said that until 1974 or 1975, Ni-Vanuatu were interested in listening to the radio for two reasons, to hear record requests and to hear indigenous stories and songs. He commented that there was little local interest in the news, whether world news or regional news. People's greatest interest in the news was to hear when officials of the two governments were to visit their village, so that they could prepare a welcome, and then to hear about the event afterward on the radio.

Those Ni-Vanuatu who were able to receive Radio Vila adequately, responded to it from the beginning by engaging with it in correspondence. There was a strong local involvement in record-request programs, as there was also to hearing indigenous stories and songs. This response raises a number of interesting questions about the way in which people are educated to engage with radio. In her analysis of the early years of Australian radio, Lesley Johnson argued that the form in which radio developed during the twenties was not necessarily a given. During this period, she stated, "not everyone agreed that [radio's] potential as a domestic companion was the best or only way to make use of this technology" (1988, 1). Johnson argued that the characterization of radio as "the-world-out-there brought to listeners in a domestic, private life" is not axiomatic to the medium but is rather a construction that assumes the public and private domains to be already constituted and separate (1988, 45).⁹

The idea of the passive, private listener seems, from the beginning, not to have resonated with Ni-Vanuatu. Insofar as radio already existed in the New Hebrides, it existed as a medium of interchange. While this interchange was predominately the privilege of expatriates, the idea of radio as a means of communication between individuals was well established and was presumably familiar to many Ni-Vanuatu. This idea of exchange would also have been reinforced by the inclusion from the beginning of the record-request program, which provided an avenue for interaction with the radio, and gave people the power to affect what was broadcast by writing in. One might also argue that although by the seventies increasing numbers of Ni-Vanuatu were being educated at primary

level, the notion of communication without engagement, which is integral to published text, to books and articles, was not well entrenched. In a primarily oral system, communication always involves response.

A further aspect of this issue is the distinction that can be made between hearing and listening. I draw this distinction from John Potts' analysis of Australian radio (1989, 8). The ear is passive, open to all stimuli. Listening is an active function by which a person tunes in to a particular sound while filtering out extraneous material. Listening is thus the application of hearing. Potts observed that while in the early days of broadcasting, radio was the focal point of a concentrated listening, a different relation to the medium exists in Australia today. Much radio programming, especially for commercial radio, assumes hearing rather than listening. The radio is part of a general flow of background sound. When a person's attention is caught by an item that interests them, hearing becomes listening, a focused attentiveness. In that the condominium introduced broadcasting to communicate information, radio programming was designed for, and assumed, a listening audience. Keith Woodward, a British residency staff member who oversaw the introduction of radio, said that he "originally envisaged broadcasting as a means of communicating, putting over information about health and agricultural extension work, not as entertainment" (interview, 3 Sept 1993).

In this way, radio in Vanuatu, from its inception until 1994,¹⁰ assumed a listening rather than a hearing audience, and it received it. Ni-Vanuatu listened to the radio both because, at least initially, attentive listening was required to hear information through the static, and also because radio brought them information and ideas to which they did not otherwise have access. An increasingly important aspect of this approach was the development of service messages, by which government, businesses, and individuals communicated with people in the islands and also, sometimes, in the towns. While communicating specifically from one person to another, these messages constituted a kind of news service of the same kind that the teleradio had provided.

Service messages have always been the most listened-to program. Broadcast at least three times a day, they are short messages relating news, making arrangements, and announcing deaths. "Dead messages," which provide details of a death and burial, calling together nominated family members from various parts of the country, and which are signaled by a short theme tune, are listened to with more attention than anything else on the radio. Other service messages relate primarily to transport, of

both individuals and goods. As an eccentric but telling example of this, David Luders, a longtime Vanuatu resident, recalled for me a service message dating from 1978 or 1979. In the message a particular man was instructed to be ready at a named beach on a nominated day, with his blanket and bushknife, so that a condominium government vessel could pick him up and bring him to Port Vila to serve his prison sentence (pers comm, 16 Nov 1998).¹¹ Service messages also relate to the shipment of goods, both to and from the islands.

People listened to the radio, both to service messages and to programs. They responded to service messages, as appropriate, with action. They responded to programs with correspondence. According to Ligo, the greater proportion of this correspondence related to the broadcasting of indigenous knowledge and practice. The program generated a form of competitiveness. People would hear a story from another island, or another village on their island, or even from another clan in their own area, that was similar to one they also told themselves, and would write to the radio requesting that their version be broadcast. Sometimes, Ligo said, they would write to say that the version first broadcast had been stolen from them. Or they might write to say that they had the same story in their own island, but that it went further than the story that had been broadcast. Ligo's response was to try to broadcast all versions "so that people could hear the difference." This did not happen so frequently with songs, which were sung in local languages, and therefore not accessible to the majority of listeners.

Ligo's account of response to the radio in the early seventies thus suggests a notion of radio quite different from the one that Johnson has argued developed in Australia in the twenties. Rather than seeing the radio as a way of gaining access to the "world-out-there," Ni-Vanuatu response was concerned mainly with programs that engaged with their own world, the knowledge and practice that arose out of the place itself, and with their own concerns. At the same time, this engagement was with the whole country, rather than that of their own immediate place, creating a sense of a larger unity—a unity not just of the region that people knew through trade and exchange, but of the whole archipelago.

In 1975, French Resident Commissioner Gauger, invited Paul Gardissat to leave the teaching profession and take up a position as "Chief of the Bislama section, French Residency Information Service." Gardissat had previously worked in radio in Algeria. The commissioner's idea was that Gardissat, who spoke Bislama and had spent thirteen years

teaching in the islands, could provide a kind of liaison service for the French government with the Ni-Vanuatu. In the event, Gardissat proved something of a thorn in the side of the French administration, as he was often critical of their approach to the independence movement. Although he was involved in many other aspects of both radio and the French government newspaper *Nabanga*, Gardissat had an extensive knowledge about, and interest in, indigenous knowledge and practice and also began to make programs in this area, broadcasting in both Bislama and French. Ligo and Gardissat both made *kastom* programs for some period, for the British and French governments respectively, but from 1976 Ligo was working as a political reporter, and it is my impression that he paid less attention to *Taem Nao*, *Taem Bifo* from that time.

Like Ligo, Gardissat received a considerable correspondence from Ni-Vanuatu regarding all his programs, including his *kastom* program. He remembered receiving over fifty letters every day, and has kept some of those letters that interested him.¹² People often sent traditional stories to be broadcast. Thus, for example he has a letter dated 3 May 1976, from Taes Thomson from Hokua village, northwest Santo, written in English, which begins, "It is my own pleasure to write you this Custom Story. I'm very interested of listen to the Custom Stories from all the islands in the group. So I would like to tell one story. It's a really true story." Gardissat also sometimes received tapes. Gaetan Bule, from Narovorovo village on Maewo, sent a cassette with a letter in Bislama dated 5 December 1975, explaining that it contained a recording of a dance called *nalenga*, which had been performed three days earlier at a marriage. Gardissat subsequently developed a system called "walkabout cassettes" by which he sent a tape recorder and tapes to the islands, on request, for people to record stories for broadcast.

Gardissat's approach to the broadcast of traditional material often involved both dramatization and interpretation. He scripted stories and used sound effects and other devices to enliven the account. A longtime resident of Vanuatu (originally from New Zealand) told me that Gardissat's productions were "as good as the BBC"—a high accolade. Gardissat attributed the success of his program at least partly to his attempt to provide some contextualization for the stories, so that people not familiar with the region from which the story came had access to some information that enabled them to understand how the story fitted in.

The issue of understanding traditional stories is relevant. Jean

Tarisesei, now a member of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre staff, told me that during the seventies when living in Port Vila and bringing up young children, she didn't often listen to the cultural programs on the radio (interview, 9 Feb 1997). She was, she said, interested mostly in listening to material from her own island, Ambae, because then she understood what the stories were about. Tarisesei also suggested that the greater number of listeners to the radio were men. She considered that this was because women's domestic duties made it hard for them to sit down and listen to the radio, but a number of other reasons can be hypothesized. One is that the exchange and transmission of local knowledge and practice from area to area had always been primarily the preserve of men, both through the trade networks and also, later, in that most of the people exposed to other places and ideas through the labor trade were men. The discussion and analysis of traditional knowledge and practice was itself a male practice. More importantly, for many years Bislama was a male language. In that women did not travel widely in Vanuatu until some years after independence, and in that men tended to be the members of the community who engaged with visiting outsiders, women did not need to, and often did not, speak Bislama.¹³

RADIO, BISLAMA, AND THE NATION

Gardissat reported that when he first worked on the radio, he was much criticized for his Bislama. At that period the language was not standardized, but existed in a number of versions: plantation Bislama, which was used by expatriates to give instructions to Ni-Vanuatu; French Bislama; English Bislama; and versions of the language specific to certain islands. There seems in particular to have been considerable difference between the language as spoken by Ni-Vanuatu and as spoken by expatriates. Gardissat received criticism on all sides. Had he been Ni-Vanuatu himself, he argued, the Bislama he used would have occasioned no comment, but as a Frenchman, his use of the language raised many issues about the status of the language itself. He was criticized for speaking it at all, and for the way in which he spoke it. French expatriates were incensed because they said he wasn't speaking Bislama but English, while the English accused him of speaking not Bislama but French. Ni-Vanuatu criticized him for using expatriate pronunciations, for example of place names. Gardissat said that his Ni-Vanuatu colleagues at the radio refined and polished his fluency in the language as spoken by local people.

The contribution of radio to the standardization of Bislama (which has been noted elsewhere; compare Jolly 1994, 12), is very important to *kastom*. In order for local knowledge and practice to be presented to an archipelago-wide audience it has to be made at some level comprehensible in a language common to all, that is, in Bislama. Radio both facilitated and developed the presentation of aspects of local knowledge and practice at this level, and was the means of standardizing the terms, and the very words, in which it was communicated. It is the radio, in this sense, that made *kastom* a nationally recognized phenomenon.

Indeed, the very idea of the archipelago as a nation was promulgated by radio.¹⁴ Godwin Ligo, talking about the early effect of broadcasting, said that Radio Vila brought people to understand that Port Vila was the capital of the whole country, and that the name of the country was the New Hebrides. Initially people identified primarily with their own island, and when they heard about Vila it seemed to them to be another country itself, one a person might need a passport to visit.¹⁵ Gradually, however, they began to identify with the nation. This effect of radio was significantly linked to the development of the independence movement in the seventies, and in turn, it was the independence movement itself that increased listenership to the radio. Interest in the radio accelerated greatly after 1974, when the movement for independence began to gain momentum. However much people had or had not listened to record requests and *kastom* programs, at this time they began struggling with the static to hear the latest developments in this eventful period of their country's history.

One of the central concepts in the platform of the indigenous political parties that developed during this era was the notion of the unity of the Ni-Vanuatu as distinct from both the colonial powers. Uniting people who were divided by their mission, education, and employment histories between the British and the French, the nation's incipient politicians made much of *kastom* as representing a unified identity for all the indigenous inhabitants of the archipelago. At this point a kind of national discourse about the importance of *kastom* began to develop. That is to say, radio programs had drawn rural Ni-Vanuatu's attention to the idea that a unity existed in the island-by-island diversity they recognized. As local knowledge and practice are seen to arise out of each place so, in an overarching sense, a nationally characteristic knowledge and practice could be understood to arise out of the whole archipelago. Now politicians drew people's attention to the distinctiveness of that knowledge and practice—

kastom—and identified it as an important basis for claims for independence. At the same time many of these politicians established an intellectual rapprochement between *kastom* and Christianity. Instead of being opposed, the two were seen as feasibly coexisting.¹⁶

The independence movement was marked by contestation not only with the two governments (which had radically different approaches to the granting of independence), but between different local political movements. These coalesced through the late seventies into a coalition of Francophone parties, and an Anglophone party that, in the event, became the first government of independence. As these political parties took shape, one of the points of contestation between them was debate as to which could most legitimately claim to represent and support *kastom*. This discussion and debate took place both in meetings held around the country, as the various political leaders traveled and held meetings widely through the archipelago, and on the radio. Although the condominium practiced censorship by controlling both access to the radio by political leaders and news reportage,¹⁷ discussions about *kastom*—debates about its validity as a basis for independence, and about which political party most legitimately represented *kastom*—were broadcast on the radio. *Kastom* became, in this period, part of the rhetoric of Vanuatu nationalism, part of the way in which politicians and others characterized the nation and affirmed its value and importance.

Here, the difference between *kastom* and indigenous knowledge and practice begins to become clear. The identification of *kastom* as the characteristic that makes the Ni-Vanuatu different, in turn acted on the way in which *kastom* itself was understood. It came to signify that very difference, the practices and characteristics that distinguish the Ni-Vanuatu from other people. No longer characterized as manifesting the darkness of unenlightened heathenism, *kastom* was defined as not only good but as crucially important to the positive characterization of the newly independent nation. A strong association between *kastom* and identity was forged in the rhetoric of this era. *Kastom* was increasingly spoken of as the basis of Ni-Vanuatu identity. This connection is what leads to the formulation Jennifer Mwera quoted to me: *kastom* is the life of the people.

This positive characterization of *kastom* reached a highpoint in December 1979 with the First National Arts Festival, which took place in Port Vila. The festival, which was organized by Godwin Ligo and was named after his radio program, *Taem Nao*, *Taem Bifo*, brought together performance groups from all over the archipelago who presented to each

other songs, dances, magical skills, carving, and more—in a festival in the true sense of the word—an occasion of extraordinary vibrancy and enthusiasm. Writing about the festival a year later, Ligo summed up much of the argument I am making here. The festival, he stated, “has brought about an awareness amongst Ni-Vanuatu of the importance and the vividness of our own culture. There is also a realisation of the importance of preserving and developing culture, custom and traditions as a means of reinforcing national identity. The first Cultural Festival came at a vital moment in the history of Vanuatu, and showed to the world at large their identity, which was their passport through the gate of Independence as ‘Ni-Vanuatu’” (1980, 65).

Independence was achieved seven months later, on 30 July 1980. Radio Vila, which had been renamed Radio New Hebrides in 1977, became Radio Vanuatu.

REINFORCING THE CONCEPT OF *Kastom*

Gardissat's *kastom* program was particularly influential because his interest in local knowledge and practice constituted a reversal of the position that Ni-Vanuatu expected condominium officials to take. Here was the government on the radio, asserting the importance of local practice. Gardissat had a strong commitment to *kastom* and saw his program as an opportunity to express what he saw as its considerable importance, and to increase comprehension of this evaluation. He attempted to refine the definition of *kastom* by introducing a distinction between it and two other Bislama terms, both also derived from English: *kalja* and *tredisin*. He used *tredisin* to refer to Ni-Vanuatu practices that have been adopted from elsewhere, such as the singing of New Year (*Bonne Année*) songs, a speciality of the people of Erakor village near Port Vila, and *kalja* to refer to all contemporary practice. He made programs devoted to each of these three terms and attempted to reinforce the distinction between them in a number of different ways.

Here then is an important point concerning the nature of the influence of radio. While Gardissat's three terms were quickly adopted by politicians and other people discussing *kastom* (such as Ligo in the quotation just cited), the distinction between them was never successfully introduced. I have had a number of extensive discussions with people in Vanuatu about *kastom*, *kalja*, and *tredisin*, the conclusion to all of which has been that there is no difference between the three. People who use the expression *kastom*, *kalja mo tredisin* seem to do so to reinforce their

emphasis on *kastom* and not to distinguish between the terms. From this it can be argued that radio is successful in introducing new concepts and ideas where there is already an openness to those concepts within the audience. People welcomed the broadcast of *kastom* by the government, and the implicit assurance that it was to be positively evaluated, because they themselves were willing or even eager to adopt that positive evaluation. A definitional distinction between various forms of local practice did not meet with an already receptive audience, and was never established, although the terms themselves were widely adopted.

Gardissat's program had a far wider range than the broadcast of stories and songs, told by Islanders or dramatized with inventive flair. He welcomed researchers working in the country onto the program, and discussed their research with them. This included not only anthropologists, but also archaeologists and biologists. He also made programs about the archipelago's history.

One of the people who appeared on the program was an ethnomusicologist called Peter Crowe, who was working in the north of the archipelago during the seventies. In 1976 the condominium obtained a grant from the South Pacific Commission to initiate an Oral Traditions Recording Project. This was established under the aegis of the Cultural Centre, an institution that had been founded in 1956 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the condominium. Crowe selected four village men from islands in northern Vanuatu and trained them in recording techniques at a two-week course held on the island of Ambae. Material they recorded during the course was sent to Gardissat in Vila and broadcast from Radio Vila during the fortnight.

Thus was established a very important link between the work of the Cultural Centre, especially the work of Cultural Centre extension workers known as fieldworkers, and the Radio. Under the direction of Kirk Huffman, who was appointed as the Cultural Centre's first full-time curator from 1977, the Oral Traditions Project developed in scope and importance. Two of Crowe's trainees, James Gwero and Jeffrey Uli Boe, formed the nucleus of a group of over seventy volunteer fieldworkers who continue to work to document and revive knowledge and practice, each in their own village and region. The fieldworkers meet every year for a two-week workshop at which they are trained in all kinds of documentation and recording techniques. At these workshops they also discuss the nature of *kastom*. The Men Fieldworkers Group, which has been meeting annually since 1981, has developed a sophisticated philosophical dis-

cussion, both about the nature and content of local knowledge and practice, and about how that relates to the present conditions of education, development, and tourism in the archipelago. A Women Fieldworkers Group was founded in 1994.

The Cultural Centre contributed increasingly to Gardissat's program during the late seventies, until Gardissat relinquished responsibility for it to the Cultural Centre. Huffman mostly edited the program at the Cultural Centre, using recordings made by fieldworkers. Sometimes experienced fieldworkers, such as James Gwero, themselves prepared whole programs based around their own material. The significance of the fieldworker network's contribution to the program is that through it, rural Ni-Vanuatu have continued to have the means to engage with the radio. As service messages and record-request programs (now driven partly through the growing telephone network) have continued to be extremely popular, so interaction with the radio through the *kastom* program was maintained through access to the fieldworkers and the Cultural Centre.

Reinforced by the rhetoric of the government of independence, which continued to affirm *kastom* as central to Ni-Vanuatu life, the Cultural Centre program served to affirm the importance of *kastom*, and was widely listened to. The importance of this became clear to me when I undertook the research I discussed at the beginning of this paper. Wherever I went on Ambae, people were conversant with the concept of *kastom* and with the work of the Cultural Centre. As part of the Women's Culture Project, my colleague Jean Tarisesei and I made programs that derived from our Ambae research. We found that the programs preceded us around the island, so that when we visited new areas people were already aware of our project. More importantly, people were very keen to record stories and songs to be included in the programs, and listened with critical interest to broadcasts, commenting to us, as they had twenty years before to Godwin Ligo, about stories that are "the same but a little bit different."

From 1992 to 1994 Tarisesei herself was responsible for making the *kastom* program as a Cultural Centre staff member. This experience altered her understanding of the importance of *kastom* on the radio. Two decades earlier, as I have mentioned, Tarisesei had been personally uninterested in listening to *kastom*. When she started making programs herself, she began, she said, to realize how many people do listen to *kastom*, and how interested they are in it. People often came to see her at the

Cultural Centre to ask her about things they had heard on her program, and if she serialized a story and then for some reason didn't put the next part on the next week, people would come and ask her about it (interview, 9 Feb 1997).

In 1994 the Vanuatu Government recreated the radio as a corporation, the Vanuatu Television and Broadcasting Corporation, and commenced charging government departments and nongovernmental agencies for airtime. As a result Radio Vanuatu no longer provided a steady stream of information to Ni-Vanuatu (agriculture programs, women's programs, and so on), as few organizations could meet the prohibitive charges for airtime. Instead, the station began to broadcast increasing proportions of music.¹⁸ At the same time, FM98, a music station modeled on commercial FM popular music stations in western countries, was founded, broadcasting to Port Vila and to Luganville. Both stations increasingly assume a hearing rather than listening model in radio, a development that is far from welcome in the islands, as rural Ni-Vanuatu depend on the radio as the source of all kinds of information.

The Cultural Centre was one of the organizations unable to pay for airtime, and the *kastom* program went off the air. This was not a development welcomed by rural Ni-Vanuatu. Jeffrey Uli Boe, a fieldworker on Maewo, spoke to me about this. He said of his fellow villagers: "They asked me: 'Usually every Saturday evening at six o'clock we wait to hear *kastom* stories and songs. When someone tells a story from his island he sings the song that belongs to it. But now we don't hear this any more. Why not? . . . These things are ours, within *kastom*. Other countries make sure their *kastom* comes out on the radio, how is it that we don't? . . . We must make it alive again'" (taped interview, 4 Feb 1997).¹⁹ Similarly a John Frum cult leader from Tanna, Jif Isaac Wan, sent a news item to the radio during 1996 in which he asked the government to ensure Radio Vanuatu made many *kastom* programs (Jacob Kapere, pers comm, 4 Feb 1997). Rural people feel disenfranchised by radio programming that does not attend to their own knowledge and practice, and to the *kastom* that they have learned to recognize as the basis of their identity.

The decision to conform to western commercial models of radio (which was, I understand, effected by expatriate advisers) fails to recognize the central importance of radio to people living in a primarily oral culture, without other sources of information. Chief Shadrach, praising the radio, said to me that it is a wonderful source of information—about

weather and tides, and giving notice of deaths. The hearing model of radio assumes, incorrectly in rural Vanuatu, that broadcasting is primarily entertainment, and that information like this can be obtained elsewhere.

Radio has made a profound contribution to the constitution of the nation of Vanuatu. A crucial element of that constitution is the way in which, through the presentation and exploration of local knowledge and practice as *kastom*, radio has linked indigenous projects to the national ideal. The idea of nation is connected not only to education and development, but to local practice, to the history and ritual by which Islanders make sense of their everyday lives. The remotest villager, hearing on the radio that *kastom* is the basis of Ni-Vanuatu identity, is able to perceive him or herself as integral to the nation. Radio could not have achieved this linkage alone. Rather, by affirming publicly something that many people valued privately, it facilitated the development of a region-wide acknowledgment of the nature and importance of *kastom*.

Significantly, there has never been any policy about the broadcasting of *kastom* on the radio. Bob Makin, who was first employed as British radio officer and subsequently appointed as director of Radio Vanuatu from 1980 to 1991, said that there was never any formal intention on the part of the station as a whole to affirm *kastom*. Apart from the *kastom* program, if the radio was saying that *kastom* is important, he said, that is because people were saying so and the radio reported it (interview, 2 Aug 1992).

The importance of the radio in the redefinition of *kastom* is a function of the way in which radio created a nationally received forum for the communication of ideas. Radio both presented and reinforced new concepts, creating through *kastom* programs an opportunity for rural Ni-Vanuatu to access a national arena, and through it to learn about each other. Although traditional knowledge and practice is being eroded by education, employment, and development, the loss of this program was a disenfranchisement that had the potential to significantly affect the degree to which rural Ni-Vanuatu perceive themselves as partners in the nation. The Cultural Centre fought against the prohibitive fees for their program for a number of years and in 1998 succeeded in gaining a reduction of the fees to a level that they could manage within their overall budget. The program returned to air in mid-1998, in the same Saturday-at-six time slot, reintroducing the Kavelicolico song, retrieved from the Radio Vanuatu archives, as its opening theme. Nothing could more clear-

ly demonstrate the Cultural Centre's assessment of the importance of radio to the ongoing affirmation that *kastom* is, as Jennifer Mwera said, the life of the people.

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THIS PAPER IS BASED ON INTERVIEWS and discussions with many people, whose contribution to it I would like to acknowledge here. In particular I wish to thank Reece Discombe, who introduced me to many crucial actors in the early days of radio in the New Hebrides, and educated me about the technical realities of radio communications. I also thank Frank Palmer, Simeon Kaltonga, Charlot Long Wah, Chief Willie Bongmatur, Godwin Ligo, Paul Gardissat, Bob Makin, Darrell Tryon, Kirk Huffman, Keith Woodward, Jennifer Mwera, Chief Shadrach Rasa Usi, Jeffrey Uli Boe, Jean Tarisesei, and Jacob Sam Kapere. All these people provided information which is incorporated into this paper. I would also like to thank a number of Vanuatu Cultural Centre staff and fieldworkers who enhanced my understanding of the role of radio, notably Willie Roi, James Gwero, and Eli Field. This paper has benefited from comments made by a number of colleagues. Here I thank Eric Hirsch, Lamont Lindstrom, David Luders, Klaus Neumann, Miriam Meyerhoff, and Ralph Regenvanu. The paper was first prepared for the Fulbright symposium, *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World*, held in Darwin in July 1997. I thank Claire Smith for the invitation that stimulated me to write it.

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Notes

1 The smaller provincial centers, such as Norsup and Lakatoro on Malakula, Isangel and Lenakel on Tanna, or Saratamata on Ambae, have some generator-supplied power laid on. This is an irregular service, operating for limited periods at certain times of the day, affected by fuel supply and engine failure. The power is used primarily for lighting. Although generators are used to run video machines in rural areas, I have never seen them used for radios.

2 *Ni-Vanuatu* is the term used to describe the inhabitants of the archipelago since independence. This discussion ranges in time across both pre- and post-

independence eras: for the sake of simplicity I use the term throughout the paper, rather than switching from *New Hebrideans* to *Ni-Vanuatu* and back again.

3 The young men involved included Willie Bongmatur (who subsequently became the first president of the Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs) and Philip Ngungunon, both from Ambrym; Leong Baes from Ambae, who played guitar; and a Fijian called Paul Chino (interview with Willie Bongmatur, 27 July 1996).

4 I have argued this point at greater length elsewhere (Bolton 1993).

5 The first Ni-Vanuatu employee of the British Information Office was MacKenzie Tuleo; the first in the French Office was Jean-Baptiste Ramwel. Both men participated in broadcasting: MacKenzie Tuleo, for example, read the Bislama news when it was first introduced.

6 Charlo Long Wah recalled that the first program broadcast by Radio Vila included some local music recorded especially for the occasion. Long Wah helped MacKenzie Tuleo to record Paul Isono ("the best music man in town") playing his mandolin under the mango tree at the store near the stadium in Port Vila (interview, 12 February 1997).

7 I interviewed Paul Gardissat twice, on 29 July 1996 and 14 February 1997, and drew on both interviews for this paper.

8 All quotations from Ligo in this paper were drawn from this interview.

9 Shaun Moores, discussing the social history of radio in Britain, traced a similar process by which radio became identified with domestic space during the twenties and thirties (1988). In Vanuatu, by contrast, as I hope to demonstrate in future work, radio seems to be identified primarily not with the indoors, but with the semi-public space of the hamlet yard and the community space of the men's house.

10 As discussed at the end of this paper, in 1994 the radio station was incorporated as the Vanuatu Television and Broadcasting Corporation and changed its policy on the presentation of programs.

11 Luders reported that he checked with David Shephard, a British district agent at that period, who confirmed that the man in question did come to Vila as instructed.

12 These letters are kept in Gardissat's personal files and cover the period in which he worked for the radio, 1975–1986.

13 It is hard to tell at present how many women did speak Bislama in the period before independence. Margaret Jolly reported that when she worked among the traditionalist Sa of south Pentecost in 1971, men actively discouraged women from learning Bislama (1994, 8). However, this probably represents only one part of the picture. Dorothy Shineberg has recorded that between six and ten percent of labor-trade recruits between 1865 and 1929 were women (pers comm; see also Shineberg 1999). Those women at least can be assumed to have spoken Bislama or its antecedents.

14 Edward LiPuma briefly discussed the importance of the media in the creation of "an articulated public sphere" in Oceania (1955, 50–51). I would argue more strongly that radio is crucial to the creation of a public sphere throughout Melanesia.

15 Ligo said a common Bislama expression at that period was "*Mi karim paspot blong go long Vila*" (I need a [take my] passport to go to Vila).

16 For accounts of the use of *kastom* by Ni-Vanuatu politicians in the construction of the nation, and the integration of *kastom* and Christianity, see Tonkinson 1982; Facey 1995.

17 The tradition of government-controlled news censorship continued after independence, and is the subject of all the publications on radio in Vanuatu known to me (Manua 1995; Nash 1995; Toa 1996).

18 Radio is also, of course, important to the creation of local popular music industries in Melanesia, as Michael Webb demonstrated, largely in passing, in his analysis of popular music in Papua New Guinea (1993).

19 "*Olgeta i bin askim mi, se olsem wanem ia, from we long evri Sarere olsem, long 6 oklok, oltaem mifala i stap reri blong harim ol kastom stori, ol singsing. Taem wan i stori long narafala, olsem long aelan blong hem, gogo nao, i singim singsing blong hem. Be naoia mifala i nomo harim nao. I olsem wanem? . . . From we, oli talem se, evri samting ia i stap long yumi long kastom. From narafala kantri, olgeta i stap mekim kastom blong olgeta i kam tru long radio. Be olsem wanem long yumi? . . . Ating i moa gud we yumi mas mekim i laev bakagen.*"

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NHBNS, New Hebrides British National Service

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Abstract

This paper traces the development of radio broadcasting in Vanuatu, arguing that radio was critical to the development of ideas of Vanuatu-as-nation among the residents of the archipelago. From its inception, radio broadcast *kastom*—material understood to derive from the place itself, such as local songs and stories—and in broadcasting it contributed to the development of a complex understanding of *kastom* itself. By this means *kastom* was defined as expressive of national unity as well as regional diversity, and as a basis of identity; the presentation of *kastom* on the radio has provided Islanders with a point of connection with the new context of the nation. In tracing the history and significance of the broadcast of *kastom*, the paper argues that radio developed a distinctive form in Vanuatu, not addressing a passive and private listener, but rather interacting with an audience that engaged with the radio through correspondence and other contributions, and through both sending and responding to service messages. In 1994 this was overturned by creation of the Vanuatu Television and Broadcasting Corporation, which was designed to conform with western commercial models of radio. The consequent cutting of *kastom* programs resulted in a significant and locally acknowledged disenfranchisement of rural Ni-Vanuatu.

KEYWORDS: identity, *kastom*, nation, oral traditions, radio, Vanuatu